

VIRGINIA SCOTT

Women on the Stage

in Early Modern France

1540-1750



CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE

www.cambridge.org/9780521896757

This page intentionally left blank

WOMEN ON THE STAGE IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE: 1540–1750

Focusing on actresses in France during the early modern period, Virginia Scott examines how the stereotype of the actress has been constructed. The study then moves beyond that stereotype to detail the reality of the personal and artistic lives of women on the French stage, from the almost unknown Marie Ferré – who signed a contract for 12 *livres* a year in 1545 to perform the “antiquailles de Rome” or other “histories, moralities, farces, and acrobatics” in the provinces – to the queens of the eighteenth-century Paris stage, whose “adventures” have overshadowed their artistic triumphs. The book also investigates the ways in which actresses made invaluable contributions to the development of the French theatre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and looks at the “afterlives” of such women as Armande Béjart, Marquise Du Parc, Charlotte Desmares, Adrienne Lecouvreur, and Hippolyte Clairon in biographies, plays, and films.

VIRGINIA SCOTT is Professor Emerita in the Department of Theater, University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She specializes in commedia dell’arte and French theatre of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Her books include *The Commedia dell’Arte in Paris*, which won the George Freedley award, and *Molière: A Theatrical Life*. Professor Scott is also a dramaturg, playwright, actor, and director.

WOMEN ON THE STAGE
IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE:
1540–1750

VIRGINIA SCOTT
University of Massachusetts at Amherst



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521896757

© Virginia Scott 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provision of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published in print format 2010

ISBN-13 978-0-511-77152-1 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-89675-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of urls for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

*To my dear friends and colleagues
Laurence Senelick
and
Richard Trousdell
with gratitude for years of support and companionship*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> viii
Introduction	I
1 The actress and the anecdote	II
2 “So perverse was her wantonness”: antitheatricalism and the actress	38
3 In the beginning: “12 <i>livres</i> per year”	59
4 “Those diverting little ways”: 1630–1640	101
5 Mademoiselle L’Étoile: 1640–1700	142
6 “Embellished by art”: 1680–1720	198
7 Lives and afterlives: 1700–2010	246
<i>Bibliography</i>	289
<i>Index</i>	313

Acknowledgments

This book has been underway for a while, and I am indebted to many people and institutions for support and assistance. My thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a 1999 senior fellowship, to the American Society for Theatre Research for a research grant, and especially to the Camargo Foundation for a 2003 residential fellowship.

I am appreciative of the help of librarians and archivists at the great national libraries of France and at the archives of the Comédie-Française. Closer to home, I have never been disappointed by the University of Massachusetts Library Interlibrary Loan, and I owe special thanks to Kathryn Leigh, director of that office, as well as to Abby Yochelson, research librarian of the Library of Congress. I also want to thank Ida Hay from the Bunker, the Five-College Book Depository, which lives under the Holyoke Range in a former headquarters of the Strategic Air Command, who found for me a truly obscure document, scanned it, and attached it to an e-mail. How amazing are the ways of scholarship in the modern world.

E-mail has also made it possible for me to consult – pester – many colleagues for help and advice. Among them: Sabine Chaouche, Jody Enders, Aurore Evain, Annette Fern, Melinda Gough, Al Hamscher, Sarah Hanley, Alan Howe, M. A. Katritzky, Amalia Kessler, Anne MacNeil, Patricia Ranum, Joseph Roach, Louis C. Seifert, Laurence Senelick, Dan Smith, Jed Wentz, and Andrew W. White. Many others have listened to me talk about actresses and acting at various conferences and seminars and have responded with useful comments and fruitful ideas.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Sara Sturm-Maddox, who read much of the book and offered many insights and helpful suggestions for revision. We had such a good time doing a book together that she was kind enough to afford me the luxury of having a friend–colleague–first reader for this one.

Finally, I want to thank Victoria Cooper and Rebecca Jones of Cambridge University Press for their support.

Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

The illustration on the cover is *Thalia, Muse of Comedy* (1739), by Jean-Marc Nattier. It is used with permission from the Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco.

Introduction

In 1729 the celebrated actress Adrienne Lecouvreur died in mysterious circumstances. Some of the events that supposedly took place before and during her final illness are reported by her friend, Mlle Aïssé, in a letter written to Mme Calandrini:

Shortly thereafter, la Lecouvreur became so ill in the middle of a play that she could not finish. . . The poor creature went home, and four days after, one hour after midnight, she died.¹

La Lecouvreur, a poor *creature*, is thus summed up by her “friend,” who was not, incidentally, known as *la Aïssé*, although her own history was far from impeccable. An epistolary writer, Mlle Aïssé was meant to have been a Circassian princess, sold into slavery and bought by the French ambassador to Turkey, who brought her back to France to be raised by his sister-in-law. Like her friend Adrienne Lecouvreur, she never married, and she had at least one notorious love affair and at least one illegitimate child. Nonetheless, she retained the honorable title of “mademoiselle.”

Why “la Lecouvreur”? Inside the theatre of the *ancien régime* the actress was almost always given the title “mademoiselle,” but outside the private world of the stage, the actress was often referred to not with a title but with an article. Even today in France, the *la* is sometimes used, although now it indicates an actress of mythic stature. Among the praises Pierre Cardin lavished on Jeanne Moreau when she was inducted into the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 2001: “We do not hesitate to call her ‘LA MOREAU.’”²

¹ Charlotte Elisabeth Aïssé, *Lettres de Mademoiselle Aïssé à Madame Calandrini* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1878), pp. 102–3.

² “Discours prononcé dans la séance publique tenue par l’Académie des Beaux-Arts... pour la réception de Mlle Jeanne Moreau... par M. Pierre Cardin,” www.academie-des-beaux-arts.fr/membres/actuel/cinema/moreau/discours_reception_cardin.htm

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, “la” meant something quite different. It was not an honorable title but a dishonorable substitute. Historically, “monsieur,” “madame,” and “mademoiselle” were not modes of polite address but titles that indicated a person’s place on the social ladder.³ The *petit peuple*—servants, craftsmen, peasants—had no titles, and the issue of what titles could be assumed by more affluent members of the third estate was sensitive.

Actors and actresses, who came from many different social strata, were often perceived to have adopted titles to which they were not *entitled*. Men usually took a stage name that implied the particule, sometimes a feature of the landscape like Montfleury or Parc, sometimes a place name like Molière. To this they added the title “sieur de,” thus assuming the particule and higher status. Actresses, most of whom were married to actors, took the title “demoiselle” or “damoiselle.” In the Middle Ages a “demoiselle” was someone married to a “demoiseau,” a gentleman, although one who had not been knighted.⁴ This may offer a clue as to why actors and actresses adopted the titles they did: they were pretending to nobility, but at the lowest level.

Honoré de Balzac suggests another possible reason actors chose these titles, asserting that the title “sieur” was “accorded by Charles V to the bourgeois of Paris, permitting them to buy seigneuries and call their wives by the fine name of demoiselle.”⁵ If Balzac has it right, we might infer that the actors were not claiming nobility *per se*, but merely bourgeois wealth sufficient to buy an estate. On the other hand, that particule with its claim to ownership of property and the noble status that went with it suggests a more obvious motive.

In general, men were accorded their borrowed rank. “M. Molière” or “M. de Molière” or “sieur de Molière” were all used to refer to or address the actor–playwright; “le Molière” is unheard of. But mademoiselle Molière was often “la Molière,” and the other actresses in the troupe were la Du Parc, la de Brie, la Beauval. There seems to have been a general unwillingness to allow them the use of “demoiselle.”

Actors, actresses, and playwrights were all very conscious of titles and how they were employed. Molière, for instance, uses the title “madame” in a very particular way, calling attention to the bourgeois penchant for self-aggrandizement. Madame Jourdain, of course, is the

³ In referring to a person, one used a title: “le sieur,” “la demoiselle,” and “la dame.” When directly addressing the holder of such a title, one said “monsieur,” “mademoiselle,” or “madame.”

⁴ *Trésor de la langue française*, <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm> ⁵ *Ibid.*

wife of a pretentious bourgeois, Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe* is a pretentious bourgeoisie herself, and Madame de Sotenville in *George Dandin* is a member of the aristocracy. Molière is playing on the social significance of titles. In *George Dandin*, for instance, the rich peasant complains of having married a “demoiselle.” His in-laws, the Sotenvilles, impoverished gentry, cannot possibly give him the “monsieur,” but address him as “son-in-law.” When he responds with “mother-in-law,” the lady snaps back that he must never use such familiarity with her, but must always address her as “madame.” Dandin gets it wrong again, however, addressing his father-in-law as “Monsieur de Sotenville,” which produces an instant rebuke: “Learn that it is not respectful to call people by their name, and to those who rank above you, you must say simply ‘monsieur.’” They also chide him for referring to his wife as “ma femme.”⁶

In the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Molière again puts all of these rules into action. The Jourdain address each other as “ma femme” and “mon mari,” and only when Madame Jourdain interrupts her husband’s tryst with the marquise Dorimène does she ironically confront him as “monsieur mon mari.” The aristocrat Dorante, a count, gives his host and hostess the “monsieur” and “madame,” but only in conjunction with their surname; he always addresses them as “Monsieur Jourdain” and “Madame Jourdain,” as does Dorimène.

The adoption and careful use of titles is also a feature of Gougenot’s *Comédie des comédiens*, probably performed in 1632, very early in the history of the Paris stage.⁷ This metatheatrical play spends quite a lot of time on the subject of “condition” or social status. Mademoiselle Boniface and Mademoiselle Gaultier, new members of the troupe, although bourgeois in origin are always addressed as “mademoiselle” without surname and referred to as “ces demoiselles,” signifying that in this fictional universe they partake of the “quality” or condition of actor. Their husbands are a merchant, Boniface, and a lawyer, Gaultier, also newly inducted into the company. Gaultier assumes that as a man of the robe he will have a greater claim to the roles of kings than his commercial rival, but Bellerose, the leader of the troupe, disabuses him. In the theatre, unlike the real world, talent and hard work triumph over birth and status; all are equally “messieurs” and “mesdemoiselles.” Obviously, titles are of no small importance to the members of the troupe.

⁶ Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), vol. II, pp. 469–70.

⁷ N. Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: P. David, 1633).

This question of “quality” is addressed largely through the action of the two servants, Guillaume and Turlupin, whose masters want to bring them along into the troupe, but only as *gagistes* or *nécessaires*, paid by the day to play minor roles while they continue to serve. Guillaume and Turlupin have other ideas, however, and refuse to come unless they are included as *compagnons*, sharing members. At issue is not only the money but the quality and the title of “monsieur.”

TURLUPIN Monsieur de Beauchasteau, since you seem to have the opinion that my comrade and I should join your troupe, if this would not dishonor the theatre, it seems to me that you would lose no personal honor by giving us the “monsieur.”

GUILLAUME Honor that we will receive straight away in our new condition.

Bellerose then asks Gaultier and Boniface to approve the addition to the troupe of “Monsieur Turlupin and Monsieur Guillaume.”

GUILLAUME That’s the way to talk to men of wit.

TURLUPIN Yes, yes, that’s why we’re here.

GAULTIER Turlupin told me. . .

TURLUPIN Monsieur Turlupin.

GAULTIER . . . of his intention and that of Guillaume.

GUILLAUME You have trouble pronouncing that word “monsieur”?

BONIFACE Monsieur Guillaume and Monsieur Turlupin, you will be satisfied.

Finally even the Capitaine, the troupe snob, agrees, after Guillaume warns him:

GUILLAUME You must say “monsieur” or we will call you simply “capitaine.”

Intimidated by this dreadful threat, monsieur le Capitaine, having vented his earlier anger at these men of vile condition on a lion, two tigers, and three giants, agrees and shakes their hands.⁸

“Monsieur le Capitaine” is a clue to the origin of the infamous “la.” As an officer and a gentleman, at least theoretically, the Capitaine enjoys a mode of address that joins a title to a state or profession. One might also say “monsieur le duc” or “monsieur le baron,” or even “monsieur le président” to a high officer of the Parlement, a noble “of the robe.” Some lower-echelon lawyers and guild masters might be addressed as “maître”; in the rest of the third estate, however, men were often known only by

⁸ N. Gougenot, *La Comédie des comédiens*, in *Le Théâtre français au XVIe et au XVIIe siècles*, ed. Édouard Fournier, 2nd edn. (Paris: La Place, 1871), p. 299.

surname and trade or profession, and a wife used the feminine form of her husband's trade. Thus, *le boucher* Blanc and *la bouchère* Blanc, *le boulanger* Du Pont and *la boulangère* Du Pont, *le comédien* Du Parc and *la comédienne* Du Parc. According to the grammarian César Du Marsais, for women the reference to trade or profession came to be understood, leading to the construction: article plus surname.⁹ By this theory, *la comédienne* Du Parc would become *la [comédienne] Du Parc*, indicating a social status with no right to any title. In origin, the “la” was a mark of degradation only insofar as all non-nobles were degraded, but as the use of titles by the upper levels of the third estate became more widespread, refusing someone a title would be a way of demeaning him or her. The adoption by actors of the title “sieur” and by actresses of the title “mademoiselle,” given the contempt for the profession displayed by the law and the church, made them easy targets for anyone who wanted to underscore their social undesirability.

Georges de Scudéry, who was proud of his own noble status, in his play also entitled *La Comédie des comédiens* at first christens his actresses “la Belle Espine” and “la Beau Soleil,” but gives the latter a “mlle” in Act II, possibly because his gentleman character, M. De Blandimare, addresses her as “mademoiselle.” Throughout the play, however, the actors address each other using formal titles, conforming to practice inside the theatre.¹⁰ In Corneille's metatheatrical *L'Illusion comique*, titles are not an issue, since using them would give the game away. Molière's actors in *L'Impromptu de Versailles* are perfectly formal with each other, as are most of the actor-characters in most of the plays that feature them. An outsider, like the Baron in Poisson's *Le Poète basque*, might speak of la Beauchâteau, la Des Ceillets, and la Valliot, but no actor-character would do so.¹¹

Among those who wrote about actresses, Tallemant des Réaux, the gossip-monger, always uses the “la,” which stresses the contempt he tends to display for women on the stage. Various aristocratic letter-writers and memoirists – Mme de Sevigné, the duchesse d'Orléans, the duc de St-Simon – use it, aware of the social implications of “mademoiselle”; madame la duchesse and monsieur le duc were terrific snobs. The low point was reached when a pamphleteer accusing Armande Béjart of every sexual excess, including common prostitution, subtitled his work “L'Histoire de La Guérin”; the article here assumes a whole new set of

⁹ César Du Marsais, “Article,” *Encyclopédie*, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

¹⁰ Georges de Scudéry, *La Comédie des comédiens* (Paris: A. Courbe, 1635).

¹¹ In Victor Fournel, *Les Contemporains de Molière* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1863), vol. I, pp. 437–9.

implications.¹² The late seventeenth century was also the time when the marquise de Brinvilliers, convicted of poisoning most of her family, was downgraded to la Brinvilliers, and la Voisin, the wife of a bankrupt jeweler, went to the stake for practicing magic and witchcraft on behalf of ladies of the highest ranks.

For the popular view of theatrical women, we need only consult the popular ballads. Jean-Nicolas de Tralage, who kept a notebook and scrapbook in the last years of the seventeenth century, was attracted to gossip and ballads about the theatre. Among them is “Sur les Filles de l’Opéra en 1696,” a veritable cascade of “las”: la Moreau, la Diart, la Deschars, la Renaud, la Carré, la Desplace, etc., etc.¹³ Of course, the *filles de l’Opéra*, the dancers and *figurantes*, had dismal reputations, even worse than those of the women in the other state theatres.

The eighteenth century was less given to the “la,” generally using “mademoiselle,” even when accusing an actress of unbecoming behavior. Private correspondents like Mlle Aïssé may have still written about la Lecouvreur, but the theatre historians François and Claude Parfaict and Godard de Beauchamps, the gossips Bachaumont and Collé, those like Allainval and Dumas d’Aigueberre who wrote “appreciations,” all use some variation of “mademoiselle.” Even a police report of 1758, describing a drunken brawl between two stars of the Comédie-Française, uses “sieur” and “mlle.”¹⁴

The reports of the morals police, who kept their eyes on certain actresses of the Comédie-Française, especially Mlles Clairon and Guéant, had their own form of reference that combined the “la” and the “demoiselle.” Thus, they almost always refer to their prey as “la demoiselle Clairon” or “la demoiselle Guéant.”¹⁵ By the early eighteenth century, “demoiselle” had added to its earlier meanings. According to Furetière (1695), “‘demoiselle’ is also said ironically and offensively of women who lead a bad life.”¹⁶ One might suspect that this additional definition came from the adoption of the title by actresses. The word *fille* was similarly

¹² Cesare Garboli, ed., *La Famosa Attrice* (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1997). Text in French.

¹³ Jean-Nicolas du [sic] Tralage, *Notes et documents sur l’histoire des théâtres de Paris au XVIIe siècle*, extraits, mis en ordre et publiés d’après le manuscrit original, ed. Paul LaCroix [le Bibliophile Jacob] (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1880), pp. 13–24.

¹⁴ *L’Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux* No. 249 (September 25, 1878), 550.

¹⁵ See throughout François Ravaillon-Mollien, ed., *Archives de La Bastille*, vol. XII (Paris: A. Durand and Pedone-Lauriel, 1881).

¹⁶ On the other hand, it is fair to note that the majority of orders of reception, legal documents, and police reports collected by Émile Campardon pertaining to the actors and actresses of the Comédie-Française refer to them as “le sieur” and “la demoiselle.” *Les Comédiens du roi de la troupe française pendant les deux derniers siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1879).

tainted by such usage as *filles d'Opéra*, meaning a dancer or *figurante* who used the stage of the Opéra to advertise her charms.¹⁷

As was so often the case, it was Voltaire who revolted, this time against the use of “la.” In a letter of December 1735 to M. Thiériot he wrote:

We are no longer of an age, you and I, where terms that are careless and without respect are agreeable to us. I never speak of M. Thiériot except as a man whom I esteem as much as I like. M. de Fontenelle is not a friend of Lamotte, but of M. de Lamotte. This mark of politeness distinguishes those who use it. The fops of the rue Saint-Denis said la Lecouvreur, and Cardinal Fleury said Mademoiselle Lecouvreur.¹⁸

Lemazurier in his 1810 *Galerie*, the first attempt to create a biographical dictionary of French actors, quotes Voltaire and absolutely rejects the usage of the “la,” which he finds “a crude custom that has never agreed with French urbanity. We have always doubted that the people who say *la Dumesnil*, *la Clairon* have enough education to judge Mlle Clairon and Mlle Dumesnil; the authority of Voltaire confirms us in our opinion.”¹⁹

Like Lemazurier, I have decided to avoid the “la,” even though most contemporary French theatre historians use it, because I am aware of what it meant in the past. In modern usage, “la” seems to have been imported from the Italian, where it indicates divadom, a state even beyond stardom, which is wonderful. I shall, however, represent Voltaire, and shake my finger reprovingly. Under no circumstance will I ally myself with Tallemant des Réaux, or the chevalier de Mouhy, or all those anecdotalists and voyeurs who treated an actress as a thing to which a definite article can be applied: the door, the chair, the actress.

On the other hand. . .

Poor Lemazurier, stuck in the nineteenth century, was conscious of all those anecdotes and shady tales and all those prurient readers poised to welcome a book that reprised them. Believing, however, there was gold among the dross, that within all the accounts, memoirs, collections of letters and anecdotes, gossip columns, and other publications of the eighteenth century on the subject of actors and actresses he would find enough valid information to construct individual biographies of all the *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française from its beginning to the end of the

¹⁷ These women were also known as *les demoiselles de spectacle* and, if they found a sponsor, as *les demoiselles entretenues*.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Œuvres: Correspondance générale* (Paris: Pourrat Frères, 1839), vol. I, p. 501.

¹⁹ P.-D. Lemazurier, *Galerie historique des acteurs du théâtre français* (Paris: Joseph Chaumerot, 1810), Préface, vol. I, p. xv.

eighteenth century, he decides the project is a worthy one. He assures his reader that “no writer who respects morality and respects himself will permit himself to collect all the offensive trash to be found in the collections; we would never forgive ourselves for having conceived this work in such a way that it would find a place here.”²⁰ That said, and limiting himself to “those things a decent man can write about,” he still confronts the inescapable paradox. While “there are and have always been, since the establishment of the theatre, many actors whose conduct merits nothing but praise, as almost everywhere, there are exceptions; and to speak generally, if morals have taken refuge somewhere, it is hard to think that they have chosen the wings of the stage for their asylum.” So, although there will be no “disgusting images of license,” there will be a few anecdotes, some morsels a little bit *gai*, a little uninhibited, since “the lives of the actors, taken in general, do not make a work suitable for the young,” and the book “is destined only for those whose reason is formed.”²¹

Lemazurier wants to rehabilitate the theatre and the women who were part of it, wants to avoid careless disrespect, but finally, grudgingly, he has to implicitly admit that “la,” and so do I. Used originally to degrade women who were not “born,” applied to artisan wives, actresses, criminals, and prostitutes, the “la” also designates the actress an outsider, someone who found no niche in the elaborate construction of social norms that characterized the upper echelons of the *ancien régime*. Not, finally, a “mademoiselle.” Victim of the system? Not necessarily. Because actors and actresses, more often than not, have been and still are people who live outside the conventions of society, sometimes because they are excluded, sometimes because they so choose, because they are attracted to the advantages of the margins. The games played there are dicey, but the rewards are great.

Actresses can be gifted with inexplicable talents, they can be different, dangerous, sexually magnetic, sometimes “abnormally interesting,” to borrow a phrase from Joseph Roach, who in studying the celebrity actress also coined the phrase “public intimacy” to account for her accessibility, which is illusory, and her appeal, which is part of her stock in trade.²² Roach also warns us that in approaching celebrity and what he calls “it,”

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. vi–vii. ²¹ *Ibid.* pp. viii–xi.

²² Joseph Roach, “Public Intimacy: The Prior History of ‘It,’” in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 15–16. See also his *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) for a fuller discussion of the constituents of celebrity.

that seductive power to command attention, we must be neither “wholly prurient” nor “unduly prim.”²³

I propose to follow that advice, focusing on the less sensational, testing the stereotypes, challenging the anecdotes, but always aware that some actresses happily displayed themselves and their sexuality on stage and off. They had allure. They had “it.” “La Molière,” “la Du Parc,” “la Lecouvreur,” “la Clairon” – all were denied the honorable title that they claimed and cherished, but were given another that also declares: “this is not *an* actress, any old actress, this is *The Molière, The Du Parc, The Lecouvreur, The Clairon*; this is someone extraordinary.”

I share something else with my predecessor Lemazurier. Like him I have concentrated, especially in the later part of the book, on Paris and on the actresses who performed in the major theatres: the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Théâtre du Marais, the Petit-Bourbon and the Palais-Royal, the Hôtel Guénégaud, the Comédie-Française. Although there is certainly information available about the actresses of the Comédie-Italienne, the Opéra, the Opéra Comique, the other fair theatres, and the provincial theatres, I decided to set my sights on the pinnacle, as it were, because the actresses who were most noticed and written about perched there, and because without this limitation the content of the book would have tended toward the broadly general and not have dwelt, as it does, on matters of specific interest to me. I have had no intention to be exhaustive. This is not an A to Z, soup to nuts, everything there is to be said about actresses in France from 1540 to 1750 book. Rather, I have followed my nose and allowed my curiosity to guide me. I begin with the whole question of anecdotes and how to use them in writing about something that is largely characterized by anecdotal evidence, and throughout the book I am attentive to the creation and maintenance of the stereotype of the actress. In [Chapter 2](#) I explore some questions I have long had about the backgrounds of French antitheatricality in classical law and practice and in Roman Catholic thought, especially as applied to actresses. In [Chapter 3](#), I revert to narrative history and summarize what can be known about the women who performed plays and the plays they performed in France before the establishment of the Paris theatres between 1629 and 1631. [Chapter 4](#) includes, along with much of what can be known about the professional and personal lives of actresses in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, a discussion of a special group of plays, the early comedies of Corneille,

²³ Roach, “Public Intimacy.”

as evidence of what actresses may have contributed to the burgeoning art of playwriting in the 1630s. In [Chapter 5](#) I look carefully at several actresses who were stars or almost stars and speculate about how stars and celebrity influenced the now flourishing theatre. [Chapter 6](#) is concerned with the art of acting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – and here the men get my attention as well as the women. [Chapter 7](#) looks at the first half of the eighteenth century, pointing to changes and trends, though leaving much more work to be done, and finally at the ways in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century actresses have been used and abused in biographies, plays, and films.

In his preface to a collection of essays honoring Peter Thomsen, a pioneer in the field of actor studies, Martin Banham writes that the actor “exists precariously and survives through courage, obstinacy, wit, vanity, charisma, luck and sheer bloody-mindedness.”²⁴ The early modern French actress survived like that while traveling from place to place, bearing and raising children, managing a household, and fending off admirers – or not. To the scorn heaped on her profession was added the additional burden of being a woman who violated most of the limitations women were meant to accept. On the other hand, after 1630, if she “made it,” she could live *en bourgeois*, in considerable comfort, even luxury, in the capital, sharing equally in the rewards of her labor. In the eighteenth century, she could hob-nob with the powerful, dress like a princess, and revel in celebrity. Her life was certainly more exciting than most female lives; she went on the stage several nights a week, sometimes to applause and acclamation, sometimes to whistles and boos, but always with the exhilaration and the sense of exceptionalism that marks the relationship of performer and spectator. Insofar as she can be known, she deserves to be known. *Vive La Comédienne. Vivent Les Demoiselles.*

²⁴ Jane Milling and Martin Banham, eds., *Extraordinary Actors: Essays on Popular Performers. Studies in Honor of Peter Thomsen* (University of Exeter Press, 2004).

CHAPTER I

The actress and the anecdote

The link between the actress and the whore has been constructed historically through the repetition of anecdotal evidence.¹

The plural of anecdote is not data.²

Anecdotes are irresistible; personal and active, they add life and color to a narrative. Although the dangers embedded in using anecdotes are obvious, life narratives without anecdotal material can be short, not so sweet, and without much human interest. As W. H. Auden said of biography, “a shilling life will give you all the facts,”³ but nothing but the facts can be remarkably uninformative, especially when records are sparse and documents questionable.

A historian who is trying to piece together a credible representation of the past and proposes to include anecdotal information is faced with a daunting task, however: to “unpack” each anecdote, judge the information it yields, dismiss what is clearly impossible or improbable, and attempt to fit what is believable or probable into the emerging pattern that will in the end constitute “evidence.”

A great deal has been written in recent years about anecdotes and their use, especially by literary historians of the New Historicist school.⁴ For Catherine

¹ Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 26.

² Jonathan Freedland, Review of Thomas L. Friedman, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, *New York Times Book Review*, October 5, 2008.

³ Quoted by Philip Ziegler, “The Lure of Gossip, the Rule of History,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1986.

⁴ For the pros and cons of the use of anecdotes see Joel Fineman, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 49–76; Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Philip Stewart, “Complicating the Figures: Braudel’s Revolutionary Miracle,” *Diacritics* 21 (1991), 91–8; “The Status of Evidence: A Roundtable,” *PMLA* 111 (January 1996), 21–31; James Wilkinson, “A Choice of Fictions: Historians, Memory, and Evidence,” *PMLA* 111 (January 1996), 80–92; Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. ch. 1, “The Touch of the Real,” and ch. 2, “Counterhistory and the Anecdote”; Robert Darnton, “An

Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, the anecdote, like a literary work, is a text: “both are fictions in the sense of things made, both are shaped by the imagination and by the available resources of narration and description,” but they are “ineradicably” dissimilar because “they make sharply different claims upon the actual.”⁵ Joel Fineman asks us even more clearly to understand the anecdote as “a specific literary genre, with peculiar literary properties, and also with a practical literary history.”⁶ The anecdote, he adds, “as the narration of a singular event, is the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real” or “gives referential access to the real.”⁷ But neither Gallagher and Greenblatt’s defense of the anecdote as what can undermine “epochal truths” and lead the counterhistory assault on grand narratives, nor Fineman’s philosophical expedition from Thucydides to Husserl and Heidegger is of much help to a historian wrestling with the *historiettes*, *libelles*, gossip, rumors, innuendo, and flat-out lies about women who performed on stage in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It was in the eighteenth century that efforts were first made to define the anecdote and examine its evidentiary value. The word itself was included in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (1694) only as a plural; the definition: “memoirs in which are written the secrets of the policy and behavior of Princes.” The third edition of the *Dictionnaire* (1740) defines the word, now a singular, somewhat differently. Here an “anecdote” is “some distinctive or specific secret of the past that was omitted or suppressed by preceding historians.” As for usage, the *Dictionnaire* suggests *anecdote curieuse*, possibly with the meaning of “indiscreet,” and notes that anecdotes are usually *satyrique*.⁸ This revised definition reflects a shift in usage by authors. Louis de Mailly’s *Anecdote, ou l’Histoire secrète des vestales* had appeared in 1700. Three years later an *Anecdote galante, ou Histoire secrète de Catherine de Bourbon* by a woman, Charlotte-Rose de Caumont La Force, was published, and several succeeding titles make it clear that anecdotes or secret histories were almost always about sexual intrigues and gallant adventures, very often starring women.

The abbé Mallet in the *Encyclopédie* regards anecdotes with a critical eye. After noting that in Greek the word means “thing not published,”

Early Information Society: News and Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *The American Historical Review* 105 (February 2000), 1–35; Lionel Gossman, “Anecdote and History,” *History and Theory* 42 (May 2003), 143–68.

⁵ Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 31.

⁶ Fineman, “History of the Anecdote,” p. 50. ⁷ *Ibid.* p. 56.

⁸ ARTFL, *Dictionnaires d’Autrefois*, www.lib.uchicago.edu

he comments that in French it is “used in Literature to signify secret histories of deeds that took place inside the private councils or the courts of Princes & in the mysteries of their policy.” He cites the most familiar usage, the *Anekdotia* of Procopius, in which the author “painted in odious colors the Emperor Justinian & Theodora, his wife.” Mallet also notes that Varillas has published some “so-called anecdotes of the house of Florence or of the Medicis, & scattered in several other of his works different strokes of the imagination that he calls anecdotes, & that have contributed no little to discrediting his books.”⁹

Although the title of Procopius’ *Anekdotia* technically means “unpublished,” its contents are most certainly the “secret deeds” of Justinian and Theodora, or “every popular tale which might discredit” them.¹⁰ The Empress Theodora is identified as an actress, “the kind of comedienne who delights the audience by letting herself be cuffed and slapped on the cheeks, and makes them guffaw by raising her skirts to reveal to the spectators those feminine secrets here and there which custom veils from the eyes of the opposite sex.”¹¹ The affiliation of the actress and the anecdote was thus validated from the very beginning.

Others of the *encyclopédistes* also wrote about the use of anecdotes, sometimes critically, sometimes apologetically. Voltaire, in the entry entitled “Histoire,” claims to be opposed to revealing a prince’s public or private secrets. Most anecdotes, he adds, are more indiscreet than useful.¹² Of course, Voltaire also devoted four chapters of his *Siècle de Louis XIV* to “Particularités et anecdotes du règne de Louis XIV.”¹³ Here he argues that anecdotes are interesting when they are about important people and can be mined for a moral.¹⁴ Although Voltaire recognized that anecdotes, especially those that report the words of some great person, are often untrue, he takes pains to cite the sources of many of those he publishes, but without much effort to judge their probable veracity. And like many anecdotalists, he can take any molehill, plausible or implausible, and turn it into a mountain. It was, he tells us, “well known at court that [the king] said, after the death of the cardinal [Mazarin]: I don’t know what I would have

⁹ *Encyclopédie*, vol. I, p. 453, ARTFL, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>

¹⁰ Norman B. Baynes, Review of *Le Inedite: libro nono delle istorie de Procopio de Cesarea*, ed. Domenico Comparetti, *The English Historical Review* 45 (January 1930), 116.

¹¹ Procopius, *Secret History*, Pt. IX, trans. Richard Atwater (New York: Covici, Friede; Chicago: P. Covici, 1927; reprinted, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). See www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/procop-anec.html

¹² *Encyclopédie*, vol. VIII, p. 225.

¹³ Gossman, “Anecdote and History,” 153.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Siècle de Louis XIV*, ch. 24. See www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/14/o8SIEC28.html#i25

done if he had lived any longer.” In Voltaire’s note, he cites his source as the *Mémoires* of Pierre La Porte, a *premier valet de chambre* of the king from 1645 to 1653, and then goes on to add that “one sees there that the king had an aversion to the cardinal; that this minister, his godfather and supervisor of his education, had raised him very badly and had often left him lacking necessary things.” He adds even graver accusations, “which would render the memory of the cardinal infamous, but they do not appear to be proven, and all accusations must be proven.” This note seems designed to prompt the reader to rush to La Porte’s memoirs to find out what unspeakable infamy the cardinal was guilty of.

In fact, although the king’s aversion to the cardinal and his lack of necessities – in this case, sheets and dressing gowns – appears in a nineteenth-century edition of La Porte,¹⁵ the remark that Voltaire quotes does not, hardly surprising, since La Porte was dismissed from the court in disgrace in 1653, long before Mazarin died. On the other hand, Voltaire’s reader is guided to a murky accusation that cardinal Mazarin had sexually molested the 13-year-old king,¹⁶ certainly a dark and secret deed. The great man of reason was, in fact, like so many lesser beings, unable to refrain from circulating an especially juicy sex scandal.

Like Voltaire, Diderot did not necessarily refrain from using anecdotes – witness *Le Neveu de Rameau* – but he justifies the practice by suggesting that history is finally little more than a form of fiction. He writes, in the *Encyclopédie* entry entitled “Certitude,” that:

history, in effect, that we regard as the register of events of past centuries, is most often not that. Instead of true facts, it feeds with fables our irrational curiosity. That of the early centuries is covered with clouds; they are for us terrae incognitae where we walk only on shaky ground. One fools oneself if one believes that the histories closer to our own times are more certain for that reason. Prejudices, partisan spirit, national vanity, religious differences, love of the marvelous; there are so many ways open to the fable to extend into the annals of all peoples. . . . It does not astonish me that some, citing Cicero and Quintilian, tell us that history is poetry without verse.¹⁷

Add to this, he notes, the difficulty caused by “all the false anecdotes and all these *historiettes* that abound” and one must conclude that most of the events that one reads about in history are doubtful, to say the least.

¹⁵ See Pierre La Porte, *Mémoires*, in *Nouvelle Collection des mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de France*, ed. Joseph-François Michaud and Jean Joseph François Poujoulat (Paris: Chez l’Éditeur du Commentaire Analytique du Code Civil, 1839), vol. VIII, p. 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 51. ¹⁷ *Encyclopédie*, vol. II, pp. 858–9.

The word “anecdote” may have come into common usage in France in the eighteenth century, and a critique of the anecdote may have become a concern of the *philosophes*, but the thing itself in Judeo-Christian culture is at least as old as the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake. For nonbelievers, the fall of man may be labeled a fable, but for believers it is an anecdote, because it is assumed to be true. Anecdotes, as many who have written about them have noted, make truth claims. And we notice that Diderot speaks of “false anecdotes,” implying that there are true anecdotes, if only the historian is clever enough to know the difference.

Why should we bother, since the thing is so difficult? We bother in part because history without anecdotal evidence loses its focus on human behavior. As Carlo Ginzburg writes, from the beginning “within the classical tradition, historical writing... had to display the feature the Greeks called *enargeia* and the Romans *evidentia in narratione*: the ability to convey a vivid representation of characters and situations. The historian... was expected to make a convincing argument by communicating the illusion of reality.”¹⁸ Anecdotes, which promote the singular, are just the thing for producing vivid impressions, especially when illusion trumps reality. Philip Stewart describes what he calls a historian’s “strategy of verisimilitude,” in which the anecdote, “insofar as it is ‘true’... belongs to the objective, the supposedly undeniable.”¹⁹ Presumably, then, so long as they are true or “true,” anecdotes are part of the valid materiel out of which the historian builds his house of cards.

The anecdote is also troublesome because of its strained relationship with generalization, what Matti Peltonen calls “the micro–macro link.”²⁰ As Philip Stewart writes, “the unique has its place in history, but how unique can the unique be?... Although in the aggregate anecdotes purport to establish some phenomena as common, we have no way of knowing whether they are representative.”²¹ This warning is especially apt since the anecdote, by its very nature, usually represents a person or an event that is strange, out of the ordinary, and especially worthy of notice.

It is one thing to use anecdote – as do historians Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton – as a “clue,” an entry into a labyrinthine excavation revealing structures that have been ignored by historians intent on

¹⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991), 80.

¹⁹ Stewart, “Complicating the Figures,” 96.

²⁰ Matti Peltonen, “Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research,” *History and Theory* 40 (October 2001), 348.

²¹ Stewart, “Complicating the Figures,” 97.

constructing great national narratives.²² It is, however, quite another thing to use anecdotes and anecdotal material as evidence for generalizing statements. Before “the exceptional” can be proposed as “typical” many operations must intervene.

La Porte’s claim that cardinal Mazarin sodomized the boy Louis XIV offers an excellent opportunity to “unpack” or systematically analyze the probability of an anecdote’s claim on truth. Among other things, the historian must ask: Does La Porte have any ulterior motives for reporting or inventing this event? If such an event occurred, how did it come to La Porte’s attention? Does any other source confirm this behavior on the cardinal’s part with Louis or with any other boys? In fact, La Porte’s anecdote can be called into question rather easily, and probably without recourse to a sweep through the various sources we turn to for information about court life in 1652.

La Porte hated Mazarin; the word is not too strong. He blamed Mazarin for limiting what had been his close relationship with the queen mother, Anne of Austria, and he did everything in his power to turn Anne and her son against the cardinal. He devotes a number of pages in his memoirs to these efforts, as well as to signs that the king shared his feelings. His accusation against Mazarin is meant to be the climax of all his other observations.

The event in question is said to have taken place while the court was in flight during the Fronde, and is described with a certain delicacy:

On St. Jean’s day of the same year 1652 [June 24], the king having dined with His Eminence, and having stayed with him until almost seven o’clock in the evening, he sent to me to say that he wanted to take a bath: his bath being ready, he arrived very distressed,²³ and I knew why without it being necessary for him to tell me. The thing was so terrible, that it gave me the greatest suffering I ever experienced, and I spent five days balancing what I should say to the Queen. But considering that it was a question of my honor and my conscience if I did not with a warning prevent similar unhappy events, I finally told her.²⁴

The consequences: some months later, at the end of March 1653, La Porte was exiled in disgrace from the court and forced to give up his office, apparently charged with the same misbehavior of which he had accused Mazarin. Not unnaturally, this episode became the central event of his later life. He wrote on several occasions to Anne of Austria, trying to force

²² See, for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²³ “tout triste”: *triste* in the period meant more than “sad.” It meant “displeased,” even “angry,” because of something that had happened, some “affliction” or “moral outrage.”

²⁴ La Porte, *Mémoires*, vol. VIII, pp. 50–1.

her to retract, and in one of those letters, written in 1664 to the dying queen, he again described the original event:

I told Your Majesty at Melun, in 1652, the day of St. Jean, that the King, having dined with M. le cardinal, ordered me to make ready his bath at six o'clock in the river, which I did; and the King on arriving there appeared to me more distressed and more anxious than he usually was; and as we were undressing him, the *attentat manuel* that someone had committed on his person was so visible, that Bontemps, the elder, and Moreau saw it like me. But they were better courtiers than me; my zeal and my fidelity made me pass over all the considerations that should have kept me quiet. . . Your Majesty will remember, if it pleases you, that I told you that the King appeared very distressed and very anxious; this was a certain sign that he had not consented to what had happened and that he did not care for the author of it.²⁵

This version leads to some further considerations. Either there were other witnesses, who refused to speak for fear of repercussions, or La Porte is inventing them. Also interesting is the description of what La Porte said he saw: an *attentat manuel*, the result of which was *so* visible that even others could see it, others who may not have been as close to the king as La Porte. The word *attentat* has a specific meaning. It refers not just to an “attack,” but to “an outrage or violence” made against “sacred persons” or persons in authority.²⁶ This was an outrage caused manually, which may have left as its sign – if indeed it happened and left a sign – something as ordinary as an erection in a teen-age boy. In any case, the cardinal was found guilty by proximity with no confirming witnesses and by a man who was looking for anything and everything he could use against him. Even if true, it cannot be considered “true,” that is, exemplary or representative, since it appears to relate a singular event. It is hard to imagine a modern historian taking this anecdote as a serious indictment against Mazarin, and, indeed, its use is probably restricted to a study of pathologies among those who served the Bourbon monarchy.

And yet . . .

Leaving aside the theoretical struggles of so many recent historians to find a way to introduce anecdotes and anecdotal material into their narratives without falling into evidentiary traps, we are left with the fact that much of what is available as possible evidence for a study of early

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 55.

²⁶ See the *Dictionnaire de Furetière* (Rotterdam, 1690), L'Atelier Historique de la Langue Française, Redon CD-Rom. The word is not defined in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*.

modern French actresses is anecdotal, and that most of those anecdotes confirm assumptions about actresses that date back at least to Procopius.

One important primary source of information about Paris society – and Paris theatre – in the seventeenth century is *Les Historiettes* of Gédéon Tallemant, who called himself Tallemant des Réaux.²⁷ From a Protestant family of wealthy bankers and tax farmers, he showed no interest in the world of finance, but preferred the worlds of fashionable, literary, and libertine Paris. He was welcome at the Hôtel de Rambouillet from 1638 on and in later years was a confidant of the marquise, who was the source of many of the anecdotes he recorded. He toadied to Chapelain, Conrart, and Gombauld, the influential gods of Le Parnasse in the 1630s and 1640s, but deserted them for the more libertine Maucroix, Pellisson, Furetière, and La Fontaine, the companions of the Table Ronde. Although he wrote salon poetry and satires, and even one play, he did not publish them; he preferred to create manuscript collections of his and others' works. Between 1657 and 1659 he wrote down the accumulation of gossip and anecdotes that he called *historiettes*; in later years he added a few marginal notes. The manuscript was held privately by his heirs, sold for 20 *francs*, and published first in 1834–5 in a bowdlerized edition. Even so, the nineteenth century found its author to have blackened reputations simply for the pleasure of doing so.²⁸

Unlike Bachaumont's *Mémoires secrets* and Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* that circulated in France or internationally in the eighteenth century, nothing suggests that Tallemant's *Historiettes* were meant to be read by anyone other than the friends "who pressed me" to write them.²⁹ His eventual objective – never achieved – was to write a history of the "regency," that is, "the administration of Cardinal Mazarin," by which he meant the years before and after the death of Louis XIII in 1643, when "the French had known the sweetness of life, the right to think, the right to go to the Protestant or the Catholic church, the right to be amusing and amused."³⁰ Many of the anecdotes in *Les Historiettes*, while certainly amusing, could probably not have been included in a history of the previous reign that required a royal privilege for publication, something which Tallemant must have realized. Later, unsettled by the advance of orthodoxy in French society, Tallemant converted to Catholicism just

²⁷ All references to *Les Historiettes* are to the Pléiade edition: Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, *Les Historiettes*, ed. Antoine Adam, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

²⁸ See the "Introduction" by Antoine Adam, *ibid.* vol. I, pp. vii–xxvi.

²⁹ See Tallemant's *Préface*, *ibid.* p. i. ³⁰ Adam, "Introduction," *ibid.* p. xiv.

before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and “consoled himself by copying into his notebooks some atrocious epigrams on the royal spouse, the widow Scarron.”³¹ If he was aware of “blackening” reputations, at least he had no intention of doing so publicly.

The first edition of *Les Historiettes* without corrections or omissions was published only in 1960 in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, and its editor, Antoine Adam, does his best to support the essential accuracy of Tallemant’s tales, insisting that “even those least disposed to have trust in *Les Historiettes* are obliged to admit that their author has collected all sorts of confidences from the best-informed people.”³² For instance, “he learned many things about Henri IV from the marquis de Rambouillet and his wife,” according to Adam, but why the marquis, who was a young captain of the household guard, should have been privy to the private life of Henri IV, Adam does not say. In fact, according to Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, the marquise, a bluestocking, “after having appeared several times at the court of Henri IV, in the first years of her marriage, was quickly disgusted by the feverish life that was led there, by the intrigues of the courtiers, and fleeing all this, retired to the house of her father, the marquis de Pisani.”³³ If this were the case, we might expect her view of Henri IV and his court to have been unsympathetic.

Adam further argues – as another example of his assertion that Tallemant’s information can be trusted – that Tallemant’s discussion of the sexual habits of Louis XIII is credible because his informant *could* have been Pierre de Niert, *premier valet de la chambre* of the king.³⁴ If so, Pierre de Niert (or Mme de Rambouillet or whoever the taleteller) must have despised the late king at least as much as La Porte hated Mazarin, since the *historiette* is filled with the most malicious gossip.

As are most of them. A random reading of Tallemant’s discussions of fashionable Parisiennes, even those he apparently respected, yields many tales of illicit love, often expressed with surprising vulgarity. Mme Aubry, for instance, was so popular, her husband had to wait three months for a night with her; Mlle Paulet, the rich heiress of a tax official, was first noticed by M. de Guise, who lost his shoe climbing out of her window, and who said that “he always saw the little thing of the little

³¹ *Ibid.* ³² *Ibid.* p. xvii.

³³ Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, “Rambouillet,” p. 667, col. 1.

³⁴ In fact, although “Niere” (Niert) is mentioned in an anecdote describing a bed scene between Louis XIII and Cinq-Mars (Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, vol. 1, p. 347), nothing permits the assumption made by Adam that Niert was Tallemant’s source (*ibid.* p. 1021, n. 1).

Paulet in his mind's eye."³⁵ Henri IV, enamored of her voice heard during a court ballet, invited her to "sing under him," and she accepted the invitation. The *vert galant* was supposedly on his way to visit her with his young son when he was assassinated. Tallemant reports that the king was already concerned about his son's sexual preference and wanted to "rendre ce prince galant,"³⁶ i.e., to encourage him to enjoy heterosexual intercourse. Tallemant never misses a chance to pass along an accusation of "Italian" tastes.

Actresses were of less interest to Tallemant than randy monarchs, lubricious society women, or misbehaving *bourgeoises*, yet he mentions most of the important *comédiennes* of the 1630s, many in a *historiette* dedicated to the actor Mondory and subtitled "L'Histoire des principaux comédiens françois."³⁷ After noting that the theatre in the 1630s was no longer in the hands of rogues and their wives kept in common, but of people beginning to live *en bourgeois*, that is, settled in one place with furniture, Tallemant begins his review. Mlle Bellerose was a "good actress," Mlle Valliot was "as beautiful a person as one could see," Mlle Le Noir was also "as pretty a little person as one could find," Mlle Baron was "very pretty, not a marvelous actress, but a success thanks to her beauty," Mlle Beaupré was "old and ugly." To these snapshots, Tallemant adds – where he can – gossip about their love affairs.

Mlle de Villiers, although "not very beautiful," was, we hear, beloved by the archbishop of Rheims, later the duc de Guise, who wore yellow silk stockings under his soutane because she liked the color.³⁸ This is not a story that can be disputed – although it is rather reminiscent of Malvolio – but other tales can be challenged. For instance, according to Tallemant, the playwright Jean Mairet wrote several starring roles for Mlle Le Noir of Mondory's Théâtre du Marais at the order of the comte de Belin who was in love with her – "and the troupe was comfortable with that."³⁹ This anecdote deserves some close attention, not because it tells us that an actress had a lover, hardly news, even if true, but because it suggests that a not terribly important noble could influence both repertory and casting within a theatrical troupe in the 1630s.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 473. ³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 474.

³⁷ *Ibid.* vol. II, pp. 773–8. Mondory, himself, is thought by Adam and others to have been Tallemant's source.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 368. ³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 774.

Mairet, like many literary men in the period, had patrons. His first was the unfortunate duc de Montmorency, who went to the scaffold in 1632. His second was the comte de Belin who “grouped around him several renowned young authors” and who “protected the Théâtre du Marais.”⁴⁰ In all, Mairet wrote twelve plays, which were performed between c. 1623 and 1640. His three earliest plays, *Chryséide*, *Sylvie*, and *Silvanire*, were in the repertory of the Théâtre du Marais in 1632 according to Scudéry’s *Comédie des comédiens*, and in that of the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1634, according to the *Mémoire de Mahelot*. They were written before either theatre was established in Paris and before Belin became the patron of Mairet. Mlle Le Noir may, of course, have played the pastoral heroines of these early plays, but there is no evidence that they were or were not written for her. Mairet’s first play after he came under the influence of Belin was *Les Galanteries du duc d’Ossonne* with two delightful and disreputable female leading roles. Neither is a tour de force for a star, however. In 1633 or 1634 he wrote *Sophonisbe*, his greatest success, which does feature a tragic heroine, and after that *Virginie*, a tragicomedy with three good female roles. Mlle Le Noir was, however, no longer at the Marais when Mairet’s last six plays were produced there. In December 1634 she left the Théâtre du Marais for the Hôtel de Bourgogne on the king’s command. In 1637 the comte de Belin died, willing Mairet his horse, and shortly thereafter Mairet stopped writing plays.

In his *Dedication* to *Les Galanteries du duc d’Ossonne* Mairet wrote:

As for me, who has never sought fortune but by the high road, I am of the opinion that an intelligent man does everything good to merit the esteem and the favor of the powerful, but I cannot tolerate that he should demand recompense. . . I hope for no other results from my best works than the satisfaction of having written them, with the resolve never to dedicate them from now on except to my personal friends. God has given me the grace to find one friend such as I could wish for, in the person of Monsieur le comte de Belin, who, great lord as he is, and of a rank to command me as my master, adds nonetheless to all he has given me the gift of freedom.⁴¹

This almost sounds as if Mairet was creating an advance refutation of what Tallemant would write twenty years later.

Maybe Belin did take a special interest in Mlle Le Noir as well as in Mairet, maybe he did ask Mairet to write a role or two for her, maybe he made sure the troupe was not unhappy about his interference – but all of

⁴⁰ Jacques Scherer, ed., *Théâtre du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), vol. I, p. 1237.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 597.

those “maybes” may be merely elements of a theatrical cliché, the sort of tale told over and over again about rich and powerful men and pretty actresses. Equally possible is a narrative that has Mondory and the troupe asking Mairet to write something for Mlle Le Noir, an experienced actress who – according to someone writing a fantasy will for the *farceur* Gaultier-Garguille – delighted everyone with her liveliness and her pleasing little ways.⁴² There were certainly opportunities to display “pleasing little ways” in *Galanteries* and *Virginie*. Whether the lady was suited to the tragic Sophonisbe is another question.

Sometimes Tallemant’s tales, while not impossible, are also not very high on the scale of probability. One such anecdote concerns Mlle Valliot, who, according to Tallemant, after many lovers became the mistress of the abbé Armentières. The abbé, who became marquis d’Armentières after the death of his brother, supposedly took her from the stage, kept her, and was so mad about her that after her death he cherished her skull in his room for years.⁴³ Adam justifies the authenticity of the anecdote by finding it repeated in Tallemant’s brother’s *Discours sur la vie de Bensserade* that Armentières was in love with Mlle Valliot.⁴⁴ Again, maybe so. However, a record of the date of her marriage exists: September 22, 1620, the same year the abbé-marquis was born. So she was at least fifteen or more probably twenty years older than him, and remaining in love with and faithful for years to a woman so much older was not probable behavior in the seventeenth century. Nor was possessing someone’s skull. Indelicate questions must be asked: How was the skull obtained? Did the marquis rob the grave? Or have the head removed from the corpse before burial? Or was he the sort to put any old skull on display in his cabinet and enjoy telling people it was that of his ancient mistress?

Oddly enough, for one so eager to publish examples of liaisons between noblemen and actresses, Tallemant seems ignorant of the one such relationship that can be documented. A daughter, Françoise, was born in 1638 to Madeleine Béjart and the comte de Modène and baptized on July 3 with the count’s legitimate son as godfather. But of Mlle Béjart Tallemant writes – and this is the only time he focuses on an actress’s career:

⁴² Anon., *Le Testament de feu Gaultier Garguille trouvé depuis sa mort* (Paris, 1634), in Édouard Fournier, ed., *Les Chansons de Gaultier-Garguille* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprints, 1973), p. 163.

⁴³ Tallemant, *Les Historiettes*, vol. II, p. 774. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1518 n. 9.